

Lesson 5 | July 2, 2023

Commending Leaders to Gospel Ministry

Study Text: Acts 20:17–38

Central Truth: Ministers of the gospel safeguard the Church by faithfully handling God's Word and by providing examples of Christian living.

Key Verse: Reference

Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee (KJV).

Keep a close watch on how you live and on your teaching. Stay true to what is right for the sake of your own salvation and the salvation of those who hear you (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will study Paul's example of godly living and witnessing to the Ephesians.
- Students will value the power of holiness and love when sharing the message of the gospel.
- Students will avoid words and actions that detract from witness and practice words and actions that illustrate God's truth.

Introducing the Study

Say: Actions speak louder than words. Whether you're a parent trying to teach a lesson, a salesperson attempting to move a new product, or a believer leading someone to Christ, it's vital that your behavior matches your message.

Opening Activity—A Proper Foundation

(If possible, identify a class member involved in construction or who has done much of the work building their own home. Ask him or her explain the first steps to laying a foundation and some of the pitfalls or common mistakes to avoid.)

Ask. *What happens when a home or other building has a faulty foundation?* (Allow time for discussion.) A faulty foundation can lead to anything from costly repairs to a total collapse.

Say: In communication, the words you say make up only a portion of the impression you make on your audience. The lifestyle you lead serves as the foundation of your message and will either reinforce it or distract from it. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The gospel of Christ is the greatest message one person can ever relay to another. Far better than a new product, scientific advancement, or political candidate, this is news of God's redemption of the human race through Jesus Christ. God requires us to share this message with the world using both words and actions. Speaking with the elders of

the church at Ephesus, Paul pointed to himself as an example to follow in gospel ministry.

Part 1—Example of Faithful Gospel Ministry

Testimony in Life and Word

Acts 20:17–21

Say: Having spent about three years ministering in Ephesus, Paul set out to travel through Macedonia and Achaia, and eventually to Jerusalem (Acts 19:21).

When his route again passed Ephesus, he sailed by and did not stop, knowing a short visit with the church there was unlikely; instead, he stopped at Miletus and sent for the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17). He had a message of direction and warning for them.

(Share your highlights from the following text.)

Paul reminded the elders of the life of faithful service he had lived before them (verses 18–19). The apostle had consistently performed his duties as a humble bond servant or slave of Christ (see Romans 1:1; Philippians 1:1). Paul was grieved to see people bound by darkness, and rejoiced when they were released through Christ. The Ephesians also witnessed Paul's godly response when tested by the plots of unbelieving Jews.

Resource Packet Item 1: A Witness like Paul

Distribute Hand out the worksheet. Allow time to fill in personal responses. Ask: *Which of these qualities or actions is hardest for you? Which is easiest?*

Fear of reprisal did not keep Paul from telling those in Ephesus what they needed to hear (Acts 20:20). The elders to whom Paul spoke remembered his pattern of relating God's truth both in public settings (synagogues, the lecture hall of Tyrannus, etc.) and in private homes, as the apostles had done earlier in Jerusalem (Acts 19:8–9; see 5:42).

Paul's message was simple: To be saved, each person must turn away from sin and turn toward God, believing Jesus Christ has made salvation possible through His death and resurrection (Acts 20:21). The path of salvation is the same for every human being—Jew or Gentile, then or now. Through preaching and teaching, as well as through his many writings, Paul spent much of his ministry emphasizing how God's love and grace reached out to the Gentile world.

Discuss

? Is it easier to accept a leader's words of encouragement or words of warning?

? Why is it necessary to share about Christ both in public and in private settings?

? How can you keep your witness simple for unbelievers to understand?

Our Priority, the Gospel

Acts 20:22–24

Say: Paul's commitment to follow Christ resulted in ministry to the people of Ephesus and the surrounding areas. That same commitment spurred him to obediently go to Jerusalem without understanding what would happen when he arrived (Acts 20:22). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The Holy Spirit testified to Paul repeatedly that “bonds and afflictions” (verse 23, KJV) or “jail and suffering” (NLT) awaited him. One specific warning came later through the prophet Agabus, who warned Paul that the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem would bind Paul's hands and feet and turn him over to the Gentiles (Acts 21:10–12).

Paul's attitude of self-sacrifice was expressed powerfully to the Ephesian elders. Paul counted his life as worthless if he did not invest it in the work of the gospel (Acts 20:24). He had received his assignment directly from Christ through a dramatic conversion and calling and would not fail to share the message of Christ with the world.

The apostle's terminology of finishing his “course” is taken from the Olympic games and is one of Paul's favorite word pictures to describe the effort and reward of living for Christ (verse 24, KJV). He urges believers to run with purpose, eyes set on the eternal prize (1 Corinthians 9:24; Philippians 3:14; 2 Timothy 4:7).

Discuss

? Paul valued his life only as it could be spent for the gospel. How do your priorities compare to Paul's?

? What other purposes tempt believers to divert their eyes from the eternal prize?

Part 2—Exhortation to Protect God's Flock Purchased with Blood

Acts 20:25–28

Say: Jesus Christ was born into this world and ministered among us to bring God's kingdom to earth. He died and rose again to defeat the kingdom of Satan. When Paul lived and worked among the Ephesians, his words brought the truth of God's kingdom while God's miracles illustrated the reign of His kingdom (Acts 20:25; see 19:11–12). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The prophecies made about Paul caused him to believe he would not see the elders of Ephesus again. His own words at this point were not a prophecy, but they expressed his own expectations. He was likely attempting to prepare them for the possibility of his martyrdom. However, 1 Timothy 1:3 records another time Paul was able to visit to the

city again. Paul declared himself “pure from the blood of all men” (Acts 20:26, KJV). He had accepted the responsibility to declare the gospel to the people of Ephesus. It was now their responsibility to live according to the truth they had received. As God had told the prophet Ezekiel, the messenger was responsible for the lives of his listeners until he had warned them of the cost of their sin (Ezekiel 3:18–19).

Through Paul’s words, the Ephesians received a complete witness of the “counsel of God” (Acts 20:27, KJV). This would have included salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the baptism and gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the necessity of living a holy life. It was now the responsibility of the Ephesian elders to “shepherd God’s flock” (verse 28, NLT, see John 21:16), providing spiritual nourishment and guidance to the many who had received the gospel through Paul’s witness. The Holy Spirit himself had brought these elders into their position on behalf of the Savior who had purchased the Church “with his own blood” (Acts 20:28, NLT).

Resource Packet Item 2: Purchased with Christ’s Blood

Distribute the worksheet and assign the Scriptures to individuals or small groups. Allow time to look up verses and answer the questions. Discuss the reverence and honor we must have for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Discuss

? Read Mark 1:21–27. How do miracles reinforce spoken truth?

? Describe a Christian’s responsibility to share Christ with unsaved family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers.

? Why must the local church give new believers systematic training in God’s truth?

Wolves Will Come

Acts 20:29–31

Say: Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesian elders to guard and shepherd God’s flock was driven by the danger of false teachers, whom he described as “vicious wolves” (Acts 20:29, NLT). His concern for this danger may have come from his experience dealing with false teachers in the past or from the direction of the Holy Spirit. These “wolves” would have been relentless in their efforts to destroy the faith of the flock. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Sadly, some of the false teachers began as members of the Ephesians’ own group (verse 30). Falling away from the truth of Christ themselves, they then went after God’s people (see 2 Timothy 3:12–13). Driven by self-interest and pride, they desired to divide God’s people and form their own factions within the church. Paul’s warning came true; he later wrote to Timothy in Ephesus about those involved in “myths” and “meaningless speculations” (1 Timothy 1:4, NLT).

Paul drew attention to the devotion and intensity of his own work in Ephesus (Acts 20:31). As the motivation for their own ministry of care, the Ephesian elders could bring to remembrance Paul's unceasing labors for the Ephesian people. Paul's ministry was not built on self-righteousness; rather, he shed tears for all who were not right with God, knowing that everyone had sinned and must repent and believe in order to be saved (Romans 3:23; 1 Timothy 1:15–16).

Paul's warnings about guarding against false teaching have been necessary throughout history as a long list of false teachers have surfaced. Heretics who would lead hearers away from the true gospel have tried to reframe the doctrine of the Trinity, deny the Virgin Birth, and alter or add to God's finished work of salvation. Throughout history, charlatans have sought to use Christianity as a means for personal gain, just as Paul warned in 1 Timothy 6:3–5.

False prophets have historically sought to make hearers believe they were speaking on behalf of God, such as Joseph Smith who claimed to receive the Book of Mormon from the angel Moroni in the nineteenth century. Today, countless people on multiple media platforms claim to have messages from God or give personal prophecies at will.

Some false teachers even abuse their followers, either sexually or by claiming control over their lives. "Wolves" have broken into many congregations for the sole purpose of causing division by slyly introducing unbiblical doctrines or undermining leadership already in place (Jude 18–19). History records that the ones Paul warned against in 2 Timothy 4:3–4 did indeed invade the Church. They preached messages that proved popular with mass audiences, but their sermons lacked biblical truth.

Discuss

? How can believers identify—and deal with—false teachers in their local churches?

? Why must believers never consider themselves superior to those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ?

Part 3—Example of Selfless Gospel Ministry Committed to God

Acts 20:32

Say: When a believer witnesses to someone and they turn to Christ, that new believer must be entrusted to God. Paul knew this principle and applied it in his relationship with the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:32). Over time, God will faithfully cause new converts to grow and develop into mature followers. Paul wrote, "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase"

(1 Corinthians 3:6, KJV). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Paul entrusted the Ephesian believers to "the message of [God's] grace" (Acts 20:32, NLT). Those who receive salvation through Christ must build their lives on God's Word. This

spiritual “construction project” will enable new believers to become well-established in their faith and stand strong against the storms of false teaching (see Matthew 7:24–27; Ephesians 4:14–15; Jude 3).

The message of God’s grace enables all those who believe to receive an eternal inheritance “with all those [God] has set apart for himself” (Acts 20:32, NLT). Those of Paul’s converts who were Jews first knew the history of Israel and how God had given their ancestors allotments of the land of Canaan as divided among their tribes. Now through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, both Jews and Gentiles could receive God’s eternal kingdom, beginning now and one day to be fully realized in heaven (John 5:24; Romans 8:22–25).

Discuss

? Read Philippians 1:3–6. How does God’s faithfulness enable us to entrust others to His care?

? List some of the many ways established Christians can help new believers learn God’s Word.

? Read Colossians 1:3–6. How can your heavenly hope affect your mood and outlook today?

Supporting the Mission

Acts 20:33–38

Say: At the conclusion of his address to the Ephesian elders, Paul returned to a defense of his character, saying he had “never coveted anyone’s silver or gold or fine clothes” (Acts 20:33, NLT). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The apostle’s repetition of character defense may indicate he had been accused of using his ministry for personal gain. It was important to Paul to defend himself against any hint of impropriety, financial or otherwise (see 2 Corinthians 7:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:5). One part of his living example among his listeners was his practice of working to support both himself and his apostolic team (Acts 20:34). This served to reinforce his teaching against laziness (see 2 Thessalonians 3:10).

Further, Paul taught that believers are to work not only to support themselves and those close to them but also to help those unable to work (Acts 20:35). The apostle quotes a saying of Jesus to support this ministry of giving: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (verse 35, NLT). Although not recorded in any of the four New Testament Gospels, this saying may have been related to Paul by an earlier follower of Christ or even been directly given to Paul by the Holy Spirit (see John 14:26).

When Paul’s address was complete, he sealed his encouragements by kneeling and praying with the elders (Acts 20:36). Luke does not record Paul’s words. However, Paul’s prayers recorded in his epistles show him asking God to open the spiritual eyes

of believers and help believers to know His will (Ephesians 1:18–23; Colossians 1:9–14).

Resource Packet Item 3: Positions for Prayer

Hand out the information sheet and draw attention to the variety of prayer positions. Emphasize that position will vary according to personality and situation and that the vital matter is the condition of the heart.

The elders' love for the man who had been used by God for their salvation and growth in Christ was evident; they cried, kissed him goodbye, and walked him to the ship (Acts 20:37–38).

Discuss

? Why do you suppose Paul spent so much time defending his character?

? Describe the importance of prayer in our service to God and ministry to others.

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: A mixed message makes communication ineffective. Speakers who reinforce their words by their actions are far more successful than those who contradict their words with hypocrisy. Men and women who represent Jesus Christ should be the first to watch their lives to make sure His love, holiness, and power are evident at every turn. The apostle Paul was faithful in living for Christ before the eyes of the church at Ephesus and could point to himself as an example of successful gospel communication. By working hard, by showing genuine care for people, and by staying free from the accusation of greed, gospel communicators speak as loudly with their lives as they do with their words.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Ask yourself: Am I communicating one message with my words but another with my actions?
- Ask God to expose any areas of thought, speech, and behavior that are at odds with your witness for Christ.
- Consider becoming transparently accountable to a Christian friend or ministry leader, asking them to help you see any “blind spots” in your life.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Instructions for Parents.

Deuteronomy 6:4–9,20–25

Tuesday:

Instructions for the Kings of Israel.

Deuteronomy 17:14–20

Wednesday:

Instructions for a New Leader.

Joshua 1:1–9

Thursday:

Leaders Called to Serve Humbly.

Matthew 20:20–28

Friday:

Respond Well to Faithful Leaders.

Hebrews 13:7,17–19,22–25

Saturday:

Instructions for Spiritual Leaders.

1 Peter 5:1–5